The Electoral Super Cycle: Elections and the Changing Political Landscape in Latin America

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Abstract

Most countries in Latin America are experiencing the longest uninterrupted period of democracy in their respective histories.The period from 2018 to 2019 can be studied as a year of political change in the region. The political landscape of the region faced a collective challenge of the rise of new leaders, a polarised citizenry coupled with economic slowdown and growing social and economic inequalities and a fast changing international environment. Nonetheless, the fact that the countries of the region have held elections in a timely manner with peaceful transfer of power leads to optimism on the future of political institutions in the region. This transition is now irreversible and the democracies have become more mature and stronger. A challenge before the new governments has been the political unrest that has swept the continent.

Developments in Latin America have a significant impact on its neighbourhood, especially relations with the United States. In looking beyond the neighbourhood, these countries are turning to Asia in an effort to not only diversify trade and economic partnerships but also diplomatic relations. Reciprocally, China and India are deepening relations here through political, economic and defence engagements. India needs to look beyond energy and economic relations to develop a better understanding of the region and its requirements. Latin American nations have long been seeking more diplomatic representation from India, this gap needs to be bridged and strengthen India's profile in the region.

Keywords: Latin America, Elections, Civil unrest, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, United States, China, India

[I] Introduction

Global activities of Latin American countries have focused largely on building economic relations within and outside the region with a rich history of regional integration. While the process started as political they have become economic in nature, beginning a process of trade liberalisation within the region. This has allowed the region to work together and build a common space to cooperate on social, political, economic, foreign policy and defence issues. Despite this heft, it can be argued that the countries of the region have yet to contribute to their potential in the international arena. Some would argue that the regions restricted role in global diplomatic affairs is largely due to the fact that it spends political energy on its internal problems such as economic decline, growing inequality, the fight against drugs and corruption.

Nonetheless, "in recent years, incumbent administrations have yielded office to elected opponents in countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Elections have come to be accepted as the only legitimate route to office. Year by year, it has become more evident that most Latin Americans have embraced this idea —that government authority must derive from the un-coerced consent of the majority, tested regularly through competitive and broadly participatory elections. It is worth pointing the commitment to building democracy has survived through prolonged hyperinflation in Argentina, Bolivia, and Venezuela; democratic institutions in many European nations in the 1920s and 1930s crumbled under similar circumstances."[i] In the face of current economic crisis the region has ones again exercised the power of the ballot. This is an important factor in the evolution of democracy in the region. Since the 1980s, countries of the region have slowly but steady worked to bring the military back to the barracks and strengthen civilian rule.

Latin American countries political history is marred by contentious civil military relations. They continue to be closely linked. This can be gauged from the fact that the lack of military's support also prompted President Evo Moraels to resign and leave Bolivia, whereas continues support from the military has allowed President Nicolas Maduro to continue to remain in power in Venezuela. This is not to say that the military support is needed by the civilian presidents but to have the support of the military does bolster the presidency. The armed forces continue to be invited by the political class to intervene in internal affairs but under the control of the government. Successive elections in the region have meant that the idea of democracy, periodic elections, the one person one vote, peaceful transfer of power, civilian government etc is firmly rooted in the region. The civil unrest is also an expression of the right of the people to protest against their governments and demand better services. As Latin American nations go from this super cycle of elections it shows that democracy and its ideas are evolving and become stronger in the future.

This has been critical in terms of political change it has brought in Latin America as people have elected new governments and changing the political landscape of the region. The super cycle of elections has impacted the domestic political and economic agenda. And yet, people have risen in protest against these very governments that they voted to power. There is simmering anger that has taken the form of street protests in a number of countries of the region, pushing the new governments to find solutions to long held demands for accountability and transparency.

Despite the diversity within the region, most of Latin America's recent elections have something in common. 'More as a vote '*against*' than '*in favour of*' a candidate or a party, a significant portion of the region's population has voted to *punish* the 'establishment', including the political elites and institutions.(emphasis added). There is a general sense of dissatisfaction among the people in the manner public policies have been made and implemented. Citizens have been critical of the functioning of the political system and public institutions.'[ii] A common factor has been people's anger against corruption and a demand for accountability by public figures and institutions. The widespread cases of corruption, implicating not just one person or party, but ranging across political parties, including some sitting Heads of States, other government leaders and prominent businesses has undermined the political institutions in the region.

The unifying issue that has bound the people in the region has been economic development. The international economic slowdown, dip in energy prices along with the disruptions caused by the United States, and the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the governments of the region are struggling to support social programmes in terms of healthcare, education, employment and poverty reduction. The recent steps taken by governments to curb social spending and/or to increase prices of commodities such as petrol and metro ticket prices have caused widespread protests that have engulfed the region. The protests have been further amplified as political parties and the people's representative continue to be charged in bribery and corruption cases.

The objective of the study is to understand the changing political dynamics in Latin America as a result of the elections (2018-2019) in the region. The paper looks at the current election cycle and the pledges of the candidates to understand the democratic trajectory of the region. It will also look at common factors that may be present in these elections and if they strengthen the democratic process in the region. It will attempt to understand the current political unrest in the region. Foreign policy has largely being confined to relations within the region and with the United States, although several hurdles continue to be present. In an effort to diversify their political and economic relations, Latin America is engaging with Asia, especially China and India. Current state of relations and possible future trajectory of India-Latin America relations is important to note as India expands on its existing global footprint.

Due to the number of nations in the region, the study is limited in scope to a few nations of Latin America. The countries under study represent major powers in the region or have made important transitions.

[II] The Changing Political Landscape of Latin America

'The Latin American context in which these elections have taken place is complex, with any number of challenges. Mounting social conflicts along with high levels of citizen insecurity and serious corruption scandals will continue to pose problems of governability in several countries of the region. Slow economic growth will be insufficient for answering the growing demands of the middle class, avoiding an increase in poverty and inequality, and ensuring that quality jobs are created.'[iii] The COVID-19 pandemic will further led to economic hardship as the global economy encounters recession.

An overview of domestic situation in Latin America shows a common trend of uncertainty, volatility and simmering anger directed at the government and its institutions. The elections that have led to change in the political landscape of the region have been polarising and populist. One can see the changing political landscape in the larger perspective of the fundamentals macro trends of the region. Thought out the 1980s the new and budding democracies were forced to accept the principles of liberalism from external forces. This led to increased poverty and rising inequality leading to what is now known as the 'lost decade'. In a reaction to the growing inequality the voters elected the leftist parties who promised equality and pro-poor policies. The left was able to fulfill the expectations of the 'decade of growth' with close to forty million people lifted out of poverty. Nonetheless, this was also accompanied with corruption charges from the highest official to the lowest. The recent elections delivered the voters desire for governments that deliver inclusive growth and no corruption. The new presidents in the region face challenges such as high crime rates, corruption and weakening of government institutions, coupled with slow economic growth, a labour market that has not been able to generate quality of jobs needed in a region which is experiencing growing inequalities.

On foreign policy issues, the nations of the region are increasingly being pressurised by the United States to address issues of illegal migration, drug trafficking and the growing presence of China in the economic sector of the countries. For example, the United States has been pressuring the governments of the region to not allow Chinese company Huawei to establish 5G network here. They are also coming to terms with the Trump administrations focus on balance of trade and tariffs on commodities. This is not to say that the United States has under President Trump or before followed a homogenous policy on its relations with the countries of the region. The countries of the region

have experienced turbulence in their relations with the United States, with the overt and covert interference from the most powerful nation in the region in their political and economic matters. The United States has supported military dictatorships and used its influence to create economic instability in the region. The current drug related violence that is claiming the lives of thousands of Central and South Americans and is one of the primary reasons for the migration of people north is due to the excessive demand for drugs and other such substances in the United States. Over the years the attitude of the United States towards Bolivia and Venezuela has become hostile. Relations with Brazil under President Bolsonaro are close ones again. However, Argentina under the Presidency of the Peronist Party could lead to differences. The region is also not a monolithic whole and has reacted to United States differently. Even within the region, their approach to issues has differed. There are regional differences on the approach to Venezuela while regional power struggles are visible between Brazil & Colombia and Argentina & Brazil.

[II a] Argentina

Centre-left opposition candidate Alberto Fernández was elected president of Argentina in 2019 in a vote dominated by economic concerns. He takes office with Vice President and also former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The peaceful transfer of power is important to note as the transition four years ago devolved into a bitter dispute over the location of the handover ceremony, which then President Cristina de Kirchner ultimately boycotted. This time around, the incumbent and the elected president sent a reassuring signal of a smooth transfer of power and cooperation between the future government and future opposition. Former President Macri's party, the Juntos por el Cambio lost the presidency and the governorship of Buenos Aires, but it will control more seats in Argentina's lower house than Mr. Fernández's Frente de Todos, and it retained control over City Hall in the country's capital. A close working cooperation is required for smooth functioning of the Congress.

The biggest issue for Argentine voters remains the economy. Although Argentina is no stranger to economic stagnation, the recent economic crisis has taken a particularly harsh toll and produced the vote against former President Macri. 'Poverty levels exceed 35 %, and unemployment stands at 10%. The economy has been relatively stable since the election, thanks in part to the Central Bank's decision to impose highly restrictive capital controls. But Argentina remains vulnerable to external shocks or abrupt policy changes, including to its monetary policy and it faces daunting debt renegotiations that could deprive Mr. Fernández of the typical honeymoon new presidents enjoy.'[iv] President Fernandez faces an uphill task of reviving the economy which has been in recession since 2018. 'When he took office in December 2019, the South American country was already in the midst of an economic meltdown and dangerously close to default. President Fernández took emer-

gency measures to alleviate the crisis: he tightened existing currency controls to preserve dwindling foreign exchange reserves, partially froze pensions and salaries, and increased taxes to refill the government's empty coffers. His government also started negotiations with the country's creditors with the aim of reducing and deferring debt repayment. But even with a favourable agreement, which is far from guaranteed, Argentina faces an uncertain economic future.'[v] This has been further aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic. President Fernandez has admitted that a lockdown would hamper economic revival but his government has prioritised the health of the people and shutdown the country to all non-essential services.

Argentina's economy has been in ill health for a long time and its relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) turbulent. Argentina has held the IMF responsible for the economic collapse in 2001 as the latter suspended funding. Since then relations between the country and the lending body has been strained. In 2018, President Macri had to ones again sought the support of the IMF. The IMF approved a US$ 57 billion rescue package, its biggest loan ever, for Argentina. The loan was criticised by candidate Fernández as harmful. Nonetheless, as President of Argentina, he has come to accept that the IMF is needed to help the economy, which has been further strained by the coronavirus pandemic.

The IMF has been forthcoming in negotiating loan with the new government. However, to ensure that loans are provided on terms agreeable to both parties, President Fernandez would have to also apply deft foreign policy measures. The United States controls 17 % of the votes in the IMF's Board of Governors making it vital for Argentina to secure the support of the United States. This engagement would require President Fernández to balance a foreign-policy that would appeal to leftist factions in his coalition while wary of ruffling feathers in Washington. President Trump has considered President Macri as his friend and had helped secure the IMF loan in 2018, which was criticised by President Fernandez during the campaign. President Fernandez would have to work to reassure Washington he would not replicate the leftist foreign policy that frayed relations between the two nations under President Fernández de Kirchner. President Trump has congratulated President Fernandez on his win and expressed a desire to work together. Perhaps in an effort to improve relations President Fernandez has been cautious on his policies on Venezuela, a close partner under Argentina's last Peronist president, Fernández de Kirchner. In 2013, she had awarded Venezuelan President Maduro the Order of San Martín, Argentina's highest honour. At present times Argentina, remains opposed to President Maduro. It has given no indication that it would be leaving the Lima Group, nations who support Juan Guaido's leadership, but is opposed to use of force. While this may help relations with the United States, but President Frenadnez's defence of President Morales of Bolivia may cause a road bump. President Fernandez had recognised the contested re-elections of

President Morales in October 2018 and has provided him asylum in Argentina. The U.S. State Department quickly announced plans to assign an ambassador to La Paz for the first time in over a decade after President Morales sought political asylum in Mexico. On Twitter, President Trump praised Bolivia's interim president, Jeanine Áñez, despite complaints about repressive policing and prejudice against the country's indigenous majority since Morales's ouster.

'President Fernández's motivations are not entirely clear. It is possible his Bolivia policy is designed to satisfy supporters of his powerful vice president, who admires former President Morales. The manner of former President Morales's removal may also be a factor. The Argentine left harbours deep resentment of the armed forces, which seized power in 1976 and murdered as many as 30,000 in a so-called Dirty War against domestic opponents. That skepticism might have predisposed President Fernández to reject the role of the Bolivian armed forces in former President Morales's resignation. There is also a large Bolivian population in Argentina that supports former President Morales. Finally, unlike President Maduro, former President Morales has built personal ties to President Fernández that could shape Argentina's approach to its neighbour.'[vi]

This support for former President Morales may jeopardise relations with the United States and by extension the IMF at a critical moment. 'In part thanks to the coronavirus, which has choked Argentina's tourism sector and depressed prices for its major farm exports, Argentina's economy is projected to shrink by 2.5% this year, and its populist government is struggling to meet public expectations of big increases in social spending. What little cash it had available is now needed for emergency economic stimulus to address the pandemic, such as tax cuts and infrastructure spending.'[vii]

President Frenandez would have to pay attention to regional behaviour focusing on Brazil, Argentina's long-term partner with whom it has several signed agreements, especially now that the partners have governments of different ideological orientations. President Fernandez had sought the release of former President Lulla leading President Bolosnaro to threaten to leave the MERCOSUR. In response to President Bolsonaro visiting Chile on his first Presidential visit instead of Argentina as traditionally done, President Fernandez visited Mexico. Relations between the two nations will become more complex as they share interdependent relations in the economic sphere. Differences could mean further delay to the MERCOSUR-EU trade agreement as Argentina calls for a review on the agreements impact on small and local industries. Argentina is also seeking funds from regional financial institutions and cordial relations with the countries of the region would play an important role in securing such assistance. 'Common foreign policy issues of South American countries will be prominent themes in the coming years. Thus, the relations of Argentina with the centres of international financial and political power, as in previous periods, will largely govern the country's foreign policy for the next years.'[viii]

President Frenandez has also proposed to create broader economic relations with China with an aim to attracting more Chinese investments to Argentina. Argentina has a comprehensive strategic partnership with China, a diplomatic status the latter confers on just a few countries. 'Argentinian relations with China are underpinned by a range of infrastructure investment packages, including nuclear power plants, two major dams and a US$ 2.5 billion upgrade of a rail network.'[ix]The relationship between the two was strengthened during the 2007 to 2015 administrations led by former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who signed more than 20 treaties with Beijing. It is expected that they will further deepen under President Fernandez as Argentina seeks alternative financial sources. An area of concern would be the trade imbalance in favour of China, but Argentina has to keep its markets open to China especially as the buying capacity of the Chinese middle class increases. While Argentina has not indicated it will join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but this may change in the future. 'In May 2017, President Macri attended the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed him by proclaiming that "Latin America is the natural extension of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road" while applauding Argentina's support and participation in the BRI. As of 2018 there were over 50 Chinese companies operating in Argentina, including Huawei, ZTE, Shanghai SVA, China TCL Group, Nanjing Jincheng, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and the People's Bank of China.'[x] While relations remained cordial under President Macri, China would be more than willing to improve relations with Argentina now and attract it to the BRI.

As Argentina copes with the pandemic, President Fernandez has found the support of not just the people but also his political rivals. Yet the economic worries would continue to plague his government and would need a strategy to help Argentina not just in the near future but in the long term as well.

[II b] Bolivia

The situation in Bolivia is underdevelopment. Days after the elections in October 2019, protests and turmoil questioned the re-election of President Eva Morales. President Morales, Latin America's longest continuously serving president, had overcome legal obstacles to get on the ballot in 2019 and run for a fourth, five-year term on the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) ticket. Carlos Mesa, a former journalist and historian who served as president from 2003 to 2005, was the opposition candidate. After preliminary results indicated a runoff would take place, a complete count was delayed and, when resumed, showed President Morales with enough support to secure an outright first-round win. The results led to nationwide protests and the military withdrawing support leading to the resignation of President Morales in November 2019.

President Morales made history by becoming the first person from the indigenous population to become President in South America. Despite being the majority of the population, indigenous people are underrepresented in government and have little economic power. He came to power on the campaign to work towards more recognition and power for the indigenous people after centuries of marginalisation and discrimination. The election President Morales in 2005 was thus a historical event and his 14 years in power have been one of the longest in Latin America. He changed the constitution to declare Bolivia a plurinational and secular nation to better represent the large number of indigenous and ethnic groups of the nation. As part of the 'pink tide' of left wing leaders that held power in Latin America, he worked with his counter parts to help reduce poverty in Bolivia, provide sustained economic growth and political stability. Since he came to office, extreme poverty dropped from 38% in 2006 to 17% in 2018. A UNDP report has stated that Bolivia has been the most successful nation in the past decade to reduce poverty. Under his leadership, Bolivia, vastly increase its public investment and helped boost the country's foreign reserves. However, his critics state that he failed to check corruption, one of the main issues for the 2019 elections. While supportive of the need for action to mitigate climate change, his economic development plans especially in the Amazon rainforests that is home to the indigenous people and lack of concern for forest fires led to large scale protests. A major reason for people withdrawing support was because President Morales overturned a referendum result in which the people had voted to maintain limit on the term numbers for President. His exist has been termed as a coup by some, where as other view it as a consequence of his need to hold on to power. He continues to be a factor in the next special elections for President in Bolivia, with the candidates unable to unite the country and the electorate divided and polarised by the recent events.

The economy has experienced slow growth and needs to be the main political agenda for all parties, yet the legacy of President Morales has ensured that he remains the focus of the elections. His shift from Mexico where he had fled in November to Argentina in December, after President Fernandez assumed power, is being viewed as a bid to remain politically active in Bolivian politics. He has already been named by his party as the chief campaigner. He is also a candidate for the Senate elections. (Former President Morales presence in Argentina will strain Argentina's relations with Brazil, which is opposed to Morales.) This may also effect Argentina's relations with Bolivia.

Brazil is supportive of fresh elections in Bolivia, which it feels would be a new start for democracy in the country. While Argentina has stated that it would like former President Morales from not interfering in Bolivian politics, it seems unlikely. In this scenario if the new government in Bolivia is opposed to Morales, it would strain relations between Argentina and Bolivia and also shift more political influence to Brazil, its traditional rival for political power in the region.

The United States, which had strained relations with former President Morales, has supported the interim government and its efforts to conduct fresh, free and fair elections. In a change from the past, the interim government in Bolivia appointed an ambassador to the United States after 11 years in 2019 and vice versa. The two nations had withdrawn ambassadors in 2008. Nonetheless, it is too early to state if relations between the two nations would improve through this exchange. If the MAS wins elections in Bolivia and President Trump returns to power in the United States in November 2020, it may led to a stalemate and a possible breakdown of relations again. The United States has not been supportive of the government of President Morales and people of Bolivia have long suspected that the United States in the past has interfered in the Bolivian government's working and it was one reason they elected President Morales. For the moment, the interim government in Bolivia has also changed its relations with Cuba and Venezuela in a departure from the past. Interim President Jeanie Anez's who took over in the political vacuum created by the resignation and exile of President Moraels, first foreign policy decision was to recognise Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido as the country's president, joining a group of around 50 countries, further gathering support from the United States. Unlike Argentina, Brazil or Mexico, Bolivia has limited strategic interests for the United States. However, the interim government has also faced allegations of using excessive force against Morales supporters, with international groups calling for international investigation.

The elections were scheduled for 03 May but have been postponed due to the total lockdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

[II c] Brazil

Voters in Brazil, the world's fourth-largest democracy elected, right of the centre, President Jair Bolsonaro making a dramatic shift from 16 years of leftist Presidents dominating the political landscape. His election caused some apprehension within Brazil as well among international observers as he spoke nostalgically about the 1964-1985 military dictatorship during his campaign and made incendiary comments about women and minorities. Nonetheless, it is likely that his views on improving law and order and his pledge to investigate corruption charges against political leaders and businesses, appealed to the electorate.

The results are being viewed as a mandate by the people for President Bolsonaro to pursue his campaign promises, which include giving the military more say in government, ending restrictions on gun ownership, rolling back environmental protections, reining in the media, and curtailing the bureaucracy. The elections have also allowed President Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party to increase its seat share in the National Congress. In the lower house of the National Congress, it went from

eight representatives to 52 (out of a total of 513 seats). In the upper house, where the party has never held a seat, it won four. However, the recent corruption charges against members of the President's family have tainted his image of anti-corruption crusader.

A little more than a year into his office President Bolsonaro has been able to break the cycle of economic stagnation and the economy experienced limited growth. He was also able to pass a reform of the pension scheme, which was the cause of maximum budget deficit, by increasing the age of retirement (from 55 to 62 for women and 60 to 65 for men). This allowed Brazil to ensure that it population continued to contribute to the economy for a longer period than before. Other major issues that would require his attention in coming time would be tax reforms, competition friendly domestic regulations, improvement in ease of doing business and possibility of the ratification of the European Union- MERCOSUR trade agreement. (This remains a major hurdle as Brazil engages more with the PORUS). He is expected to reform the tax system and continue to privatise state companies. Nonetheless, the economic slowdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic is going to affect Brazil, despite President Bolsonaro continuing to keep the country open.

On the issue of corruption he has not been successful as his son was implicated in a money laundering case by the public prosecutor's office of Rio de Janeiro. His views on climate change and his handling of the Amazon forest fires have built a negative image of the President both in Brazil and international arena. A similar image has led to low popularity of the President as he mishandles the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil.

In the realm of foreign policy, breaking with tradition of making the first presidential visit to Argentina, President Bolsonaro visited Chile. Chile's President Sebastián Piñera had supposed him through his elections. However, during his visit to Chile President Bolsonaro faced the first ever boycott of a presidential visit by Chileans, for his praise of military dictatorship and his open disdain for rights of the LGBTQ communities. "President Bolsonaro also pushed Brazil deeper into a cultural war between those favouring traditional values—including his base among the country's evangelicals—and those supportive of a more tolerant society vis-à-vis same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights, among other issues."[xi] Despite the boycott, Brazil and Chile along with seven other regional leaders launched the Forum for the Progress of South America (PROSUR) to provide economic integration for South America with the hope that it would help Brazil boost trade and investment exchanges.

Brazil and Argentina's relations are important not just to the two nations but to the region as a whole. Traditional partners, they find themselves on opposite sides of the ideological divide. The elections in Argentina have brought into power President Fernandez. Differences between the two

are likely to be reflected in the working of MERCOSUR and other regional issues. While Brazil would prefer trade liberalisation and reduction in tariffs, Argentina, facing economic slump, is likely to proceed gradually in that direction. They are also likely also differ on two issues that shape Latin American politics as on date, relations with the United States and the crisis in Venezuela.

Venezuela continues to be a major challenge for the countries of the region. The growing humanitarian crisis has led to large scale migration from the country to Colombia and Brazil. Brazil has recalled its diplomats from Venezuela even as the growing number of migrants causes tensions in Brazil's border districts. In Pacaraima, Brazil, residents set fire to migrants' camps after allegations of migrants attacking local shops. Along with Colombia, Brazil would like to isolate President Maduro, however, President Bolsonaro has not yet indicated that he would support military action against Venezuela. He has termed President Maduro as a dictator while supporting Juan Guaido, the opposition leader who has claimed the presidency in Venezuela. In January 2020, the United States and the United Nations International Organisation for Migration launched a programme to help settle Venezuelan migrants in Brazil. This will help ease the pressure on the border towns and push the migrants further south to bigger cities with more job opportunities. Brazil hopes that this will mitigate the crisis situation in its border areas.

In what can be termed as a major change in foreign policy, President Bolsonaro has moved away from the previous government's strategy of distance from the United States to a policy of working with the United States. He has expressed his admiration for President Donald Trump. The two presidents have very similar political views. They are anti- establishment, project themselves as people's Presidents, anti- globalisation, anti-climate change, anti-immigration and perhaps most importantly for the region- they both support the need for a change of political leadership in Venezuela. At present, Brazil does not support military intervention in Venezuela, the fact that Brazil may not oppose the possibility in the future cannot be ruled out. They have also been dismissive of the need to strengthen the multilateral institutional system. 'The vision of an alternative nationalist world order that buries the liberal international order is a cementing factor whose value cannot be underestimated in the new direction that US-Brazil relations is taking.'[xii]

If one is to study the foreign policy of Brazil under President Lula, it was to move away from American influence. Brazil pushed for enhanced economic regional integration, with MERCOSUR as a primary organisation for trade within the region. The Pacific Alliance is another such organisation that has a marked absence of the United States. It can be argued that the attempt was to move away from the Organisation of the Americas, in which the United States wields a disproportionate influence to one in which Brazil would be able to play a more prominent role. The emphasis was to focus on a regional approach to issues and challenges rather than rely on other powers. This ap-

proach has changed under President Bolsonaro as he joined the PORUS, an economic integration mechanism which has the support of the United States.

Unfortunately, the foreign policy agenda for the region has not worked. Admired for its sustainable development agenda and focus on the environment since the Rio-92 Summit, Brazilian government policies are destroying the Amazon rainforests. Brazilian diplomacy, traditionally recognised as a force for moderation and balance at the service of consensus building, has become a subordinate player to an aggressive and dangerous unilateralism. At the forefront of regional integration a decade ago with a push for less dependence on the United States, Brazil today supportive of intervention by extra regional powers and military action against one of the region's countries.

Another policy issue that has witnessed a shift is President Bolsonaro's views on the Middle East. He had been supportive of recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and shifting the embassy there. The potential economic repercussion of this shift for Brazilian exports to the Arab world has led him to open only a business office in Jerusalem, for the moment. A visit to the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in October 2019, was indicative that relations with the Arab world remain cordial. Brazil has also indicated that it is ready to contribute to the peace efforts in the Middle East. While the offer has not yet found support in the region it is an indication of Brazil wanting to 'bring its voice to the table' on international issues. In this the current presidency follows on its predecessor's foreign policy focus on engaging with the Middle Eastern nations. However, relations with Iran have become strained. Brazil did not condemn the killing of Iranian General Qasim Sulemani. Close relations between Brazil, Israel and the United States has seen Brasilia move away from Tehran.

Further areas of balance for President Bolsonaro would be China. President Bolsanaro during his campaign had warned that China was gaining excessive control of Brazilian industries and criticised Beijing's 'predatory practices'. He stated, China can buy from Brazil but not buy Brazil itself. Nonetheless, as President of Brazil he has realised that China is an integral part of the Brazilian economy. It is its largest trading partner and 'the China-Brazil trade and investment relationship is mutually beneficial and undermining it would hurt Brazilian farmers, an important part of President Bolsonaro's constituency. Soybeans, iron ore and crude for close to 80 % of exports from Brazil to China. Brazil is also dependent on foreign investments from China. The two countries are also part of the BRICS. President Xi and President Bolsonaro have met each other on the side-lines of the BRICS summit in Brazil and also later during President Bolsanoro's visit to China. As China increases its outreach to Latin America, President Bolsonaro would have to find ways to ensure that Chinese investments continue to prefer Brazil before dispersing to other nations. While the two nations differ on their approach to Venezuela, China continues to maintain relations with President

Maduro and his government, Brazil is also balancing the relations in a turmoil hit China-U.S. relationship. The coronavirus pandemic has shown the oscillations that can be seen in Brazil's China policy. President Bolsonaro has been critical of China and has blamed the latter for the virus and its spread. On the other hand it has also sought medical supplies from China. However, as China's economy appears poised to recover more rapidly than that of the United States, President Bolsonaro would have to build a policy that would allow him to balance relations with China while cultivating close relations with the United States.

As protest sweep Latin America, Brazilians protest against their president and his policies while ensuring social distancing norms and precautions. The street protesters might be missing but President Bolsonaro has seen his popularity dip and as he continues to defy social distancing he is increasingly being met by protestors who are banging pots and booing him from their homes. It needs to be remembered that it was the protests of 2013 against corruption that led the government of the day loose the support of the people and the ultimate rise of President Bolsonaro. It is safe to say that a similar people's movement is possible if the government is unable to provide the domestic growth that it has promised.

[II d] Colombia

Presidential elections were held in Colombia on 27 May 2018. President Ivan Duque won to become the youngest President of Colombia. He has claimed that he is an 'extreme centralist' trying to find the right balance between the policies of the right and the left.

In an election that finds similarities with others in the region, the elections were fought on domestic issues, with the debate on the peace deal at the centre. The peace accord, between the government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) has been an emotive issue within Colombia. The deal, that took four years to negotiate, was essentially to disarm the FARC and convert it into a legal political party. It gives the FARC ten congressional seats for the next eight years, and creates a transitional justice system (JEP), that dictates sentences of, at worst, eight years of restricted liberty for FARC members who confess their crimes.[xiii] The deal was rejected by the people in a referendum. Thereafter, a new deal was negotiated by the government. However, the new deal was not put to vote. Instead President Santos ratified it through Congress, where his party had a majority, a move many voters felt was undemocratic and cheated them of their rights to voice their view on the deal. It needs to be pointed that peace deal with the FARC was seen my many as being lenient to the members of the guerrilla organisation that is responsible for the deaths of a large number of Colombians. Those who lost people to the FARC's atrocities have pointed that the deal does not provide adequate punishment to the members and this needs to be rectified. To a large ex-

tent this was visible in the voter turn-out where the newly made FARC party did not win even a single seat and today occupies the seats that have been reserved for it under the peace deal.

Addressing the people's demand, President Duque has stated, he remains committed to Colombia's peace process, but wants to modify some contentious issues within the deal especially those opposed by the voters such as the guarantees of softer sentencing for rebel leaders and guaranteed seats in the Congress. However, a large number of laws connected to the peace process have not yet been passed by the Congress and the government's lack of ability to protect the gains that have been made or address the security concerns of the ex-FARC members has meant that 2019 was one of the deadliest for the demobilised guerrilla members. This development is worrisome not just for the people who supported the peace deal but for other Colombians who still believe dialogue is the way forward. The implementation of the peace deal has been inconsistent and trusts in both the government and the guerrillas are low. The critics of President Duque point that his views and lack of foresight could risk a restart of one of the longest running conflict in the region. Many feel that it would also put at risk any future negotiations with the ELN (The National Liberation Army) the second major guerrilla group in Colombia. The current peace negotiations with the ELN are at a standstill.

With the peace accord being questioned, there are reports that armed groups factions within the FARC are no longer willing to give up their arms. What is a cause for worry is that, areas vacated by the FARC, where the State has little presence, are being taken over by the ELN and other armed groups. There are also reports of rise in violence along the pacific coast and no reduction in drug trafficking and/or cocoa production. The money from drug sales, help fund the armed groups. If there is no marked reduction it could fuel other groups to fill the vacuum created by the FARC. Another issue that has come to the forefront is that some FARC members are facing difficulty in reconstructing their lives and assimilating into the society. If this continues, there are fears that they may want to rejoin other groups in order to gain social acceptance and financial security. The government has proposed to allow stronger sentences for former FARC leaders and scrap amnesty for crimes guerrillas linked to drug trade, however, the government will have to make more efforts towards the process of reincorporation of FARC members into the civilian life.

The other challenge for the President of Colombia remains the uplifting of the economy. His campaign pledged to transform the economic model and address inequality. He has proposed tax cuts and support for the energy industry. He has stated that, "We need to have the right balance between development and environmental protection. The right balance between entrepreneurship and worker rights. The right balance between free markets and the ability to fix market flaws".[xiv] Nonetheless, a year into his term, economic growth has been marginal and unemployment continues to rise. Businesses are also hoping that he will reduce administrative processes and introduce policies that

would attract more investments into the country. 'Colombia has managed to attract FDI from United States, Panama and the United Kingdom mostly in the oil and energy sector.'[xv] President Duque has pledged to improve security in terms of law and order to achieve a stable environment for economic growth. This remains an uphill task. Like many other countries of the region, the pandemic has shrunk the Colombian economy, with the Finance Ministry claiming that GDP will decrease by 5.5 % in 2020. To add to this Colombia also has to provide for a record number of Venezuelan refugees, who have crossed the border. As Colombia looks at its extractive industries to jumpstart its post pandemic economy, it would not be enough. Demand for mining products is not high and even with high demand - Colombia will have to restructure its economy from mining and extractive industries to ensuring that its large informal sector is incorporated into the formal economy. This has to be done to also ensure that social inequalities do not fuel further armed unrest in the country.

Corruption and rising unemployment tops the list of concerns for President Duque. In keeping with the wave of political unrest that has gripped the region, Colombians have also come out on to the streets to protests against the government. The strikes began with labour unions protesting rumoured pension cuts and other reforms; they joined university students protesting corruption and cuts in public education. In a short time ordinary Colombians, indigenous people and other groups joined the protests demanding better healthcare, education system, actions against corruption, violence, inequality and other issues. President Duque has stated that he is willing to negotiate with the protestors - however, talks have proved to be inconclusive. With the coronavirus pandemic the talks have come to a standstill and it is feared that the Colombia economy, which is under lockdown, will further contract.

There is also a perception among the general public that President Duque has focussed more on foreign policy issues. The political capital that Colombia has spent in recognising Juan Guaido as the President of Venezuela in place of President Maduro has not yielded results. There are no policies to address the growing number of Venezuelans who have come to Colombia. This is causing political, economic and social unrest in the country. In this atmosphere, the protest can be viewed as indicators that there is growing discontent among the population and President Duque needs to address domestic issues before he engages more extensively in foreign policy goals.

Nonetheless, as foreign policy is linked to domestic issues and in keeping with this view, President Duque along with Vice President Marta Lucía Ramirez, the country's first ever female vice-president, have outlined the foreign policy agenda that is tied to a number of domestic issues for Colombia. The most important foreign policy challenge facing the new leaders is the crisis on its borders with Venezuela. President Duque, along with Brazil wants the diplomatic isolation of Venezuela (but does not support military intervention). In turn, President Maduro maintains that Co-

lombia is shielding the people responsible for an assassination attempt on him. A charge denied by both, former President Santos and President Duque. Nonetheless, President Duque has stated "Colombia will have to maintain the pressure on President Maduro to help restore democratic rule and alleviate the humanitarian crisis. At the same time, he is aware that he needs to prepare for an even greater exodus of Venezuelans, and seek more support from the rest of Latin America to manage the dramatic and tragic migration."[xvi] Close to 1.6 million Venezuelans have crossed the border[xvii] and leading to a socio-economic crisis in the border towns of Colombia. The high number of migrants has caused problems in a country that is grappling with its own long standing problems with drug trafficking, and repatriation of FARC members. The refugee problem is exhausting Colombia's limited resources and institutional capacity to deal with the crisis is overwhelmed. 'The Colombian government is trying to legalise as many of the new arrivals as possible, giving them permission to work, plus full access to medical and educational services. The strategy worked well in the first years of the exodus but is becoming more difficult to sustain.'[xviii] Colombia has called for international support to care of the migrants. Colombia is witnessing rising tensions at migrant camps between the hosts and the migrants and the social fabric of the nation changes. To a large extent the migration is changing Latin America in a profound manner. A migration will have a more permanent impact on the countries which have largely witnessed a migration to the United States and Europe, but have seen limited movement within countries.

Within the region, Mexico is an important country for Colombia. Mexico and Colombia established a strategic relationship in 2015, which has allowed the promotion of the bilateral agenda on trade and investment, security, education and culture, and consular and migratory issues. Among other results, this relationship has led to Colombia becoming Mexico's second largest trading partner in Latin America and an unprecedented increase in the number of tourists between the two countries.[xix] The relationship is also important to address the issue of drug trafficking, drug money and the power of the cartels in the region. Colombia has witnessed a rise in coca productions and a resurgence of guerrilla groups. The two nations, under the new governments, would have to work together to address these problem, as the cartels in Mexico have links with the mafia in Colombia.

On a similar note, the most pressing bilateral issues between Colombia and the United States include combating illegal trafficking, eradicating illicit cocoa crops throughout Colombia, dealing with the on-going crisis in Venezuela, advancing hemispheric security and fostering economic ties. President Trump's views on trade are of concern for Colombia which has extensive trade relations with its larger neighbour. Nevertheless, the two Presidents have similar views on issues affecting the region.

Colombia has also withdrawn from the Union of South American Nations or UNASUR, a regional organisation that was created in 2008, by the late President Hugo Chavez, President Nestor Kirchner and President Lula. Colombia has stated that it had to leave the organisation due to its inaction on Venezuela. UNASUR was South Americas attempt to build an equivalent of the European Union. It was created in part to challenge U.S. hegemony in the region but also to provide regional economic integration in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. It was created at a time of left wing political governments in the continent. However, UNASUR fell apart following President Chavez' death and the escalating crisis in Venezuela, with the bloc failing to take action. Eventually, most of its member either suspended their membership or opted to leave all together.

With the politics of the continent shifting to the right of the centre, economic policies have witnessed a shift. Colombia along with Chile and seven other nations has established the PROSUR in 2019. PROSUR members[xx] have been critical of President Maduro and recognised Mr. Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela. It needs to be stated that coincidently all members of the new bloc are pursing closer relations with the United States and it is encouraging the establishment of new institutions that are friendly to towards it. American influence can change the dynamics of political agenda in the southern cone nations. The constant left vs right policies have a detrimental effect on the people of the region. With the United States renewed interest in its 'backyard' and attempts to arrest the growing presence of China and Russia, PROSUR is being seen as a means to influence the economic policies of the continent in its favour.

Perhaps the most important relations for Colombia are the one it shares with the United States. The personal relationship between President Duque and President Trump is being seen as a route to ensure that the United States does not advocate economic policies that will negatively impact the relations. The fact that President Duque has studied and worked in the United States is an added advantage.

The United States has always had a strong influence in Colombia especially in the security sphere where the two countries have worked together under the 'Plan Colombia'- a programme of cooperation between Colombia and the United States to assist the former in combating drugs, guerrilla violence, and related institutional and social problems. 'The US Congress appropriated more than US $10 billion for Plan Colombia and its follow-on programs between FY2000 and FY2016, about 20% of which was funded through the U.S. Department of Defence. Since 2017, Congress has provided nearly US $1.2 billion in additional assistance for Colombia. For FY2019, Congress appropriated US $418.1 million in foreign aid for Colombia, which encompassed efforts to promote peace and reconciliation, assist rural communities, and continue counter-narcotics support through the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.'[xxi] Unlike other na-

tions, Colombia and the United States have been able to maintain stable relations since 1999. both countries have signed several cooperation agreements and worked closely in the fight against drugs and the resolution of internal conflict such as between the government and the FARC. The Obama administration was supportive of the peace talks under President Santos and named 'Bernard Bronson, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, as the U.S. Special Envoy to the Colombian peace talks.'[xxii]

While the United States will continue to remain a dominant power in the region, it cannot be denied that there is a growing presence of China in the region. Even though relations with the United States remain cordial, dependency on the United States has come into question as President Trump focuses on an 'America First' policy. 'President Trump also remarked in March 2019 that Colombia has 'done nothing for us and threatened to "decertify" Colombia as a partner in the war on drugs. This would have ended most economic aid and automatically vote against Colombian loans from organisations such as the World Bank.'[xxiii] Given the circumstances Colombia is looking to diversify its relations. With the focus on investments and increasing trade, Colombia would be looking at China as an attractive partner to pursue new opportunities. For the moment China does not have a major presence in the country but this may change as the country expands its reach in the continent. It is however, the second largest trading partner, with the bilateral trade volume reached 14.6 billion U.S. dollars in 2018, up 29.2 % year on year.[xxiv] China is investing in infrastructure projects in Colombia such as in metro lines, railways and in mining. China is also investing in smaller business such as hotels and other consumer industries. Colombia is also looking to attract more Chinese tourists to its growing tourism sector, which has received a boost as a result of the peace accord. China in turn is looking to attract more students from Colombia to Chinese universities through scholarships and grants.

During his visit to China (July 2019), President Duque stated that Colombia would like to diversify its export to China. Currently 85 % of Colombian exports to China consist of oil. He would like Colombia and China to trade in technology and instead that Colombia could become the 'golden gate' for China into Latin America.[xxv] During the visit the two nations signed 12 agreements to strengthen bi-lateral relations. They range from cooperation in agriculture to education and customs. "The Colombian leader also hoped to further step up bilateral ties and expand cooperation in areas including economy and trade, energy, infrastructure construction, connectivity, the digital economy and creative industries. President Duque welcomed investments from Chinese companies and added that he believed every bilateral project would help support the peace process together with Colombia's economic and social development."[xxvi]

The two countries coming closer is a cause for concern for Washington. Beijing is keen that Colombia join the BRI, which has found support in 19 other LAC countries. As yet, Colombia has not joined the initiative but it could change in the future. The year 2020, marks 40 years of diplomatic relations and as China decides to deepen its engagements with Colombia, it could help pursued Colombia to join the BRI. Colombia has already stated that it would allow Chinese company Huawei to join the 5G telecommunication auctions as the Duque government lays stress on developing mobile coverage throughout the country - helping transforms the country's economy and create more jobs. This would be contrary to the demands of the United States which is asking allies and partners to ban the Chinese company on charges of espionage activities for the Chinese government.

Colombia presents an opportunity to China to expand its market reach, find new sources of raw material and increase its economic influence. The growing concerns within the United States of growing Chinese interests in the LAC region has led the Trump administration to invoke the idea of Monroe Doctrine. The idea has been dismissed by China as out-dated.

As Colombia strengthens its global engagements under the new administration, the challenges would be to focus on its domestic issues as it consolidates its position in the region while balancing its relations with two great powers.

[II e] Mexico

Mr. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, from the National Regeneration Movement (Morena) party, won the elections (by 53.19 % votes) to be the next president of Mexico. His was inaugurated, on 01 December 2018, after the (new) Mexican Congress assumed power on 01 September 2018. President Obrador's party also captured a majority in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, marking the first time any candidate has won both chambers since 1997.

The focal point of President Obrador's campaign was to end corruption, bring about transparency in the government, reduce violence, and equal economic growth for all citizens. President Obrador has presented a document to the Senate asking for a plebiscite on whether to prosecute his unpopular predecessors, saying he wants "the people" to give the green light to any legal proceedings against the country's former presidents. His proposal comes even as Mexico battles the coronavirus with little direction from President Obrador and an economy under stress. The global pandemic has dented the image of President Obrador due to his disregard for the medical advice to promote social distancing and self-quarantine in an effort to fight the virus. He has also refused to impose any restrictions on movement of people and goods. President Obrador has conducted huge rallies and met people despite being cautioned against the same by his health ministry. He has routinely dismissed the severity of the virus and rejected criticism of their responses to the pandemic and has reasoned

that the economy of the nation would not be able to sustain a lockdown and the large number of migrant labour and informal sector workers requires an open economy. The result has been a lack of a federal response to the crisis. This has meant that provincial governors have responded in the manner they deem best, ensuring that the measures to contain the pandemic are not uniform and death toll remains high. In an effort to be more a people's President, President Obrador has refused to stay in the Presidential palace preferring to stay at his home. He has opened the place to the public and has stated that it will instead be used for public events. He has also reduced his security claiming that the 'people will protect him' and he has initiated plans to sell the Presidential plane, stating that Mexico could not afford to maintain it.

Nonetheless, crime in Mexico has remained high and criminal organisations continue to threaten Mexico's national security. The killing of nine members of a family holding dual citizenship of Mexico and United States in an area near the border led "President Trump to speak of designating the Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organisation."[xxvii] President Obrador has been critical of targeting the cartel leaders. Instead his approach was to improve the socio economic conditions to prevent crime. Nonetheless, he is yet to outline a strategy for Mexico to fight organised crime. He did establish a national guard - however, it largely has recruits from the military who have been accused of excessive use of force. More importantly, this force has been deployed Mexico's souther border to stop illegal migration from Central America to the United States, further reducing the focus on drug related crimes and prevention. Mexico and the United States need to update the Merida Initiative to strengthen the socio-economic capacity of the people and crime prevention while providing adequate policing.

The other issue that is linked to both its domestic and foreign policy is the need to address the flow of migrants from Central America notably the Northern Triangle nations of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala- to the United States. Mexico being the last countries before migrants cross into the United States, it has been criticised by President Trump of not doing enough to ensure migrants do not come to America. The majority of the people crossing the border are people fleeing large scale violence and poverty at home. President Obrador announced a 'Marshall Plan for Central America'. "Mexico says it's going to spend $30 billion over the next five years to curb migration from the region. The plan has come in response to the recent caravans of thousands of Central Americans traveling through Mexico to the U.S. border. Officials are short on details, including where Mexico's going to get the money."[xxviii] "The United States committed US$ 5.8 billion through public and private investment to promote institutional reforms and development in the Northern Triangle."[xxix] The plan calls for the Northern Triangle nations to receive aid that will be supported by an "integral development plan", aimed to "…foster the productive sector, develop human capital, improve citizen

security and access to justice, strengthen institutions, and improve transparency…" [xxx]in an effort to make "the Central American nations a better place to live, and thus reduce the number of those leaving. It will be backed by CEPAL - the economic commission for Latin America and the Caribbean."[xxxi] There continues to be a question mark on the plan with details of funding and implementation on the ground continue to be obscure. The plan remains crucial to the Mexican government which has to provide asylum to migrants whose case is pending in the United States. In a bid to decongest the border cities the government is also asking migrants to move to other cities to get better job opportunities. Mexico has also accepted the United States-Mexico Migration Deal of 2019, under which Mexico deployed its newly created National Guard on its borders, to stem the flow of migrants before they reached the United States, and allowed for the expansion of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP, known as "Remain in Mexico"), forcing thousands of asylum seekers to wait in over-crowded Mexican border towns for their U.S. immigration hearings. This forces Mexico to take responsibility for migrants and their safety especially in the current context of the pandemic. It has put strain on the asylum system of Mexico and the public health system that is already overwhelmed by the crisis. President Obrador's visit to the United States in July 2020 was in part to celebrate the economic relations between the two nations and also to work towards greater coordination to stop illegal migration. However, what was not lost on political commentators was the fact that the two leaders have been criticised for their poor response to the pandemic.

Another issue of foreign policy and domestic consequences has been the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations. President Trump pushed for a renegotiation of the 1994 treaty claiming it had been detrimental for American business. Former President Enrique Pena Neito ended his term in office on the perception that he was unable to stand up to President Trump. President Obrador has managed to maintain cordial relations despite differences on migrants, the border wall and tariffs. Mexican government has worked well with its largest trading partner. On NAFTA, President Obrador was critical of the agreement. Nonetheless, during his campaign he stated that he would continue the negotiations with America and Canada on the same lines as the Neito government as a collapse would have an adverse effect on the Mexican economy and undermine the government's ability to fight poverty. Mexico was the first country to ratify the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The pact has been tweaked to include changes for automakers, labour and environmental standards, intellectual property protections, and some digital trade provisions. Automakers would not have to make 75% of their vehicle parts in one country up from the 62.5% of the old NAFTA. It has also set the wages for auto industry to US$ 16/ hour. This would provide the United States some compensation as wages have always been higher here than in Mexico. Under the new deal labour laws have also been strengthened to ensure that jobs in the manufacturing in-

dustry do not leave the United States for Mexico. The agreement is being seen mainly as an updating NAFTA for the 21st Century.

On economy, President Obrador has slowed the pace of energy reforms that were implemented by his predecessor. In the oil and gas sector while the new administration has honoured the contacts already signed, it has discouraged new bidding for contracts by ensuring that foreign firms that had won contracts must show results before new bidding rounds take place. As results would not be visible immediately, it has effectively stopped foreign firms from bidding from new oil contracts. In an effort to reform the judiciary, President Obrador has proposed among other things he will strengthen the public prosecutors offices and address corruption and nepotism in the judiciary.[xxxii] In an effort to push economic recovery and to address the growing gap between the rich and the poor and make policies that would empower the underprivileged, the government has increased social funding such as on pension schemes. He has announced that he would not like to create a deficit budget. The economic recovery, for the moment, will be fuelled by austerity measures taken by the government and by recovering money lost to corruption. How he intends to achieve the latter has not been outlined. The economy witnessed a further blow due to the global health crisis. The lack of any support from the government in terms of a stimulus package for the industries to mitigate the effects has thrown the country into its deepest slump since the great depression. A majority of its population works in the informal sector with no health or other social benefits, with the pandemic showcasing the social inequalities. For a stable economy, the new government has to provide a safe environment for business. The public security system in Mexico has been accused of being ineffective and corrupt. Mexico saw a record number of candidates for the elections being killed or facing threats. President Obrador has to address the linkages between corruption and the growing drug and related violence. However, all three, slow economic growth, rising crime and corruption, have proved difficult to address.

President Obrador foreign policy in the first year of presidency has largely been absent. He has not made any international travel. He did not attend the United Nations summit neither the G-20 in Japan in 2019 (Mexico was represented by other members of the government). He has also not yet visited the capitals of the region; nonetheless, Argentinian President Fernandez made his first official overseas trip to Mexico instead of Brazil, in a break from tradition. Mexico had given political asylum to deposed President Morales. Mexico has also put time and resources in Central American nations on plans for development and collaboration. Venezuela has been centre stage in Mexico's policies towards the region. President Obrador said he will return Mexico's foreign policy to its 20th-century practice of "non-intervention" in other countries' internal affairs.[xxxiii] He state that it was important for Mexico not to get involved in the internal affairs of another country as he would

not want anyone to interfere in the internal matters of Mexico. Further, President Obrador has opposed military intervention in Venezuela. He had invited President Maduro to his inauguration, in an effort to engage with the Venezuelan leader rather than isolate him. He has also stated that Mexico will be willing to offer its good offices and mediate between all sides and President Maduro, after the later announced he was open to a third party help to end the political crisis in the South American nation. This is contradictory to the earlier stand of the government of Mexico which had supported the ouster of Venezuela from the Summit of the Americas.

Focusing on Asia, President Obrador has stated that he would like to reduce the trade deficit the country has with China. Mexico is looking to diversify its trade and move away from a dependency on the United States. However, given the broad scale of the new government's plans for development of Mexico it is looking at China as an investor in its infrastructure development projects. Nonetheless, they would need to overlook the failure of the previous collaboration on high speed train projects such as the one between Mexico City and Queretaro. Chinese FDI into Mexico has been modest but perhaps due to closer ties with the United States, it has not been able to grow as much as rest of Latin America. China is expanding its outreach to Latin American Nations and would like them to participate in the BRI projects. Mexico at present has not indicated that it will join, but it has also not indicated that it is opposed to the project. Delegations in the past have attended the Belt Road Forum (BRF) in China. China got a push for its relations when Mexico decided to continue to consider Huawei for 5G telecommunication despite United States resistance. The two governments are also working together with other Latin America and Caribbean nations to confront the challenges posed by the Covid-19 virus including guaranteed access to medicines, medical equipment and vaccines. The United States under the Trump administration has also been engaged in a trade war with China, it has recently announced a trade deal which is being seen as a first step towards the resolution of the issue. President Trump's 'America First' policy, his preference for bilateral trade relations instead of multilateral institutions and a tendency to reverse decisions has meant that countries, including Mexico, are cautious in following U.S. requests and are making greater efforts to diversify their relations while also engaging with countries beyond their tradition partners.

It is interesting to note that President Obrador's party is in control of the Mexican Congress. Thus, while he was in the opposition and questioned the government, today there is no credible opposition that can counter him. It remains to be seen if the transformation of Mexico that he promised in his election can be achieved by him before the end of his tenure.

[II f] Paraguay

The landlocked nation elected its president, vice president, 45 senators, 80 deputies, and 17 governors, for five-year terms in April 2018. As per the constitution presidents and governors cannot seek re-election. This issue played a role in the elections, as the outgoing President Horacio Cartes tried to amend the constitution to allow him a second term. This contributed to the polarisation of the public that may have affected the election results. President Mario Abdo Benítez, won the election, continuing the rule of the conservative Colorado Party, with the lowest margin since Paraguay returned to democracy. These elections have been the most contentious ones since the return of democracy in Paraguay in 1992.

The Colorado Party did not get the much-heralded overwhelming victory as it was expected. Thus, the small margin of difference of votes between the two candidates has resulted in allegations of electoral fraud by the opposition. On median age, Paraguay is one of the youngest countries in the region after Bolivia. One reason for the close call in the elections has been attributed to the decline of the participation of Paraguayan youth in the electoral processes. On the other hand, as part of the general trend in Latin America and the Caribbean, the elections saw the strong participation of women.[xxxiv]

President Abdo Benítez is the son of the private secretary to Paraguay's former dictator Alfredo Stroessner and has faced criticism for defending the former leader's record. However, as they election results point out, for many people the dictatorship or the President's association with the dictator had little or no bearing on their votes. As with other elections in the region, the agenda and not the ideology of the candidate has been the basis of the people's choice. Another reason could be lack of association- a large portion of the electorate were born after the end of the dictatorship or have very little personal connection to the years of the dictatorship.

The new President campaigned on a platform of pro-business agenda to help continue the good economic growth the country has enjoyed and create jobs. His economic policies are with a view to bringing more foreign investment into the agriculture sector which is important for the fourth largest exporter of soya bean. As with the rest of the region, President Abdo Benítez also won on a platform of anti-corruption and transparency. Nonetheless, an energy deal with Brazil led to the resignation of the head of the national energy administration, Paraguay's ambassador to Brazil among other high profile officials. Critics stated that the deal, negotiated in secret would have limited Paraguay's access to energy from the Itaipu dam. This would have also reduced its revenue from the dam. Protests led to the cancellation of the deal and the demands for an impeachment which have not gained much momentum.

President Abdo Benitez is running a minority government and has to ensure that all channels of communication with the opposition parties remain open to ensure smooth functioning of the work in the Congress. President Benitez has pledged to cut poverty and fight corruption. He has stated that he would strengthen the justice system ensuring that it remained independent and strong. Major changes to economic policy were not expected, though the new President has stated he would pursue more aggressive tax policies to increase the government coffers, a move that the opposition is unwilling to support.

For Paraguay security, health and education have been the priority areas. In a bid to address the concerns, President Abdo Benitez has set up more security cameras to aid law enforcement. He is also continuing actions against the drug cartels started by previous administrations and the anti-narcotic divisions have been able to raid and destroy farms and plantations. On health and education also the new government is spending money to improve conditions but it will be need a gradual approach due to financial constraints.

On foreign policy, Paraguay has cordial relations with all nations of the region and is the member of nearly all multilateral/regional grouping. On Venezuela, it has recognised Juan Guaido claims and has also supported the isolation of Venezuela. In his visit to the United States in December 2019, the two Presidents stressed on the cooperation in fighting drug trafficking, more defence collaborations, funding in the health sector as also in developing deeper financial markets that support growth.[xxxv]

"Paraguay's geography, not least its precarious location sandwiched between Argentina and Brazil — two big regional powers with whom it fought a bitter and disastrous war in the 19th century — have led it in recent decades to seek unconventional alliances well beyond South America."[xxxvi] In a diplomatic offensive, Paraguay's Foreign minister is seeking partnerships with countries as diverse as Japan, Turkey and Qatar. It is also opened diplomatic missions in Eastern Europe with the possibility of trade and investments in the future. While Paraguay maintains close relations with the United States, President Abdon Benitez has reversed the decision of the outgoing President to shift the embassy of Paraguay to Jerusalem. Relations with China could be developed but Paraguay's relations with Taiwan may cause a hindrance. Despite this Paraguay is keen to find means to attract Chinese foreign investments into the country.

Paraguay looks to expand its diplomatic reach, while continuing to keep the faith of the business community. Nevertheless, serious concerns remain about the strength of its institutions and steps that President Abdon Bentize will take to address these issues.

[II g] Venezuela

Incumbent President Nicolas Maduro won the May 2018 elections for his second six-year term. The elections were widely condemned by the international community for its lack of transparency and allegations of fraud. The opposition which till before the elections had a united stand against President Maduro, however, become divided between those who felt that participation would provide legitimacy to President Maduro's government and those who felt that participation provides them with an opportunity to bring change.

President Maduro's government has also been facing growing international criticism for economic collapse; high inflation and widespread hunger; rampant crime; a failing health system and large-scale exodus of its citizens. The government, on the other hand, has blamed the international community and the United States for the crisis.

Along with the Presidential elections, the people also voted for members of the state and municipal legislative councils. The central issue of the election was the health of the economy. President Maduro has stated that he would work to stabilise the economy. The increasing cost of living and the spiralling inflation has meant that people are no longer able to buy basic food and medicines. Hyperinflation has also meant that the State is unable to import essential goods. Many Venezuelans have left the country for neighbouring Colombia or Brazil to seek employment. This has led to a humanitarian crisis in Colombia with tension rising between local populations and migrants in both Colombia and Brazil's border towns and cities. Colombia has called upon the international community to aid it in supporting the growing number of migrants reaching its borders.

Despite the Venezuelan election commissions claims of a good voter turnout (46% opposed to 80% during the last elections), media reported that even in pro-government areas voter turnout was low. This is a change from previous elections and a sign that President Maduro needs to engage with the regional powers to restart the Venezuelan economy.

As a result of the crisis, Venezuela finds itself isolated in the region supported only by a handful of countries such as Cuba and Mexico and internationally by Russia. The United States has time and again called for President Maduro to step down with President Trump hinting that a military intervention was also an option. In an interview to US Channel CBS in Feb 2019 he stated that it was an option that would be considered. However, the idea has not gained much traction among the other leaders of the region. As pointed above, a number of them such as President of Colombia and Mexico have opposed the idea. The United States on 31 March proposed a "…framework for peaceful democratic transition in Venezuela. There are thirteen key points in the framework, ranging from topics such as release of political prisoners to a 'Council of State' law." [xxxvii] The framework calls

for the full return of the National Assembly. It would also see the formation of a National Electoral Council and an independent Supreme Court. New Presidential and National Assembly elections are to be held under the guidance of international observers. The proposal also includes a lifting of the sanctions. The plan has been rejected by the Venezuelan government.

The migration of Venezuelans to neighbouring states such as Colombia and Brazil has triggered one of the largest migration crises in the continent. For Venezuela, it is depriving it of its working population. From one of the most prosperous nations, its GDP is contracting and its social infrastructure is crumbling with food shortage and lack of medicines. 'Latin American countries have largely opened their doors to those fleeing Venezuela, offered them access to basic education and health care, and tried to integrate them into their economies and local communities but depressing wages and unease at the never ending flow of migrants has caused anxiety among the public of these nations resulting in restrictions being placed and at time.'[xxxviii] The coronavirus has further added to the complications of allocation of limited resources.

Venezuela has been accused of being a threat to the stability, prosperity and growth of Latin America region. Colombia has accused it of funding the FARC while being counter accused as the party responsible for an assassination attempt on President Maduro. But to say that Venezuela is responsible for the instability of Latin America is disregarding the robust political movement that has led to changes in governments across the region, possible constitutional change (in Chile) and a citizen's push for accountability.

[III] **The Main Trends in Latin America: Growing Civil Unrest**

If one were to look at the political change that has come in Latin America it can be attributed to citizen's discontent with the incumbent political forces and a desire for change and accountability. In several countries, this sentiment has led to a rejection of the government and traditional parties and the emergence of anti-establishment candidates with a strong personalist style. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico are examples of this trend.

Political institutions across the continent have weakened as a result of corruption charges leading to low levels of credibility and legitimacy. This has been especially true of political parties and legislatures, the law and order system including the judiciary. The lack of trust has allowed the citizens to elect political leaders who have a populist and anti- establishment discourse plus those who have identified themselves with the common citizen and there problems. They base their flights as one that is against the old establishment and elite and for the people.

High levels of uncertainty have led to polarisation with the people becoming more pragmatic rather than identifying strictly on the basis of ideological basis. They want a leader who is strong and can produce results such as improving law and order, increasing job opportunities etc. The political disgust can be gauged from the fact that runoffs were a common feature in determining the president in Brazil and Colombia, two powerful countries of the region.

Another notable feature has been that governments with legislative minorities have come to power with the exception of President López Obrador in Mexico, who has a majority in both legislative chambers. This will make governing more complicated and the approval of strategic reforms (fiscal, employment, pension, etc.) that many of these countries urgently need more difficult.

The vote to punish ruling parties prevailed over continuity. Power alternated in the four main economies of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, while the ruling party retained power in Venezuela (by way of re-election). Nonetheless, this re-election has added to the political crisis in Venezuela with some questioning its legitimacy and validity.

The serious corruption scandals throughout the region frequently tied to irregular political financing, and high levels of citizen insecurity were two issues present in almost all campaigns. In several of these elections, social media played an increasingly important role (for example, the intensive use of WhatsApp in Brazil), progressively taking the place of traditional media. This presents new and important challenges in terms of regulations and the oversight that electoral authorities should carry out. Evangelical groups are gaining more influence, as seen in a significant number of these elections, the most notable instances were in Brazil and Mexico.

While the number of women candidates has gone up, the elections in the region were also the most violent. What is disheartening is that none of the countries of the region elected a woman to the Presidential post.[xxxix]

[IV] China in Latin America

During the last 20 years, China has penetrated into Latin America, mostly through a network of relations with friendly nationalist governments that saw Beijing as an alternative to Washington. Despite a U.S. administration that has stated that China is a strategic competitor and a change in the ideological governance of the Latin America region, China remains engaged with the region. 'China's engagement with the region has grown significantly, particularly in terms of diplomatic and economic ties. This growth reflects China's increasing global "soft power" efforts worldwide. A succession of Chinese leaders and other officials have visited the region to court governments. In turn, regional leaders and officials have been frequent visitors to China. The PRC has signed a vari-

ety of bilateral partnership agreements with several countries in the region, including "strategic partnerships" with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.'[xl]

China is part of the infrastructure development projects across the region such as port development, roads and transportation along with telecommunication. It is also now providing services to the region. While some nations have expressed an interest in the BRI, most of its existing project do fall under the BRI preview. 'Despite their vast political distance, one thing that right-wing administrations share with their socialist predecessors is the idea that Latin American countries should be more independent from Washington. And China's presence in the region allows that. The Chinese market's vast appetite for natural resources and agricultural products, and Chinese companies' affordable consumer goods for developing markets, are unmatched by the United States. Beijing, aware of this, has adopted a realist and practical approach to the situation.'[xli] 'Total China-Latin America trade increased from $17 billion in 2002 to almost $306 billion in 2018. In 2015, PRC President Xi set a goal of increasing total China-Latin America trade to $500 billion in 10 years. China's imports from Latin America and the Caribbean amounted to almost $158 billion in 2018, accounting for almost 7.5% of China's overall imports; China's exports to the region in 2018 amounted to $148 billion, accounting for 5.9% of China's total exports.

China has become the top trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay. Major Chinese imports from the region in 2018 were primarily natural resources, including ores (29%), soybeans (19%), petroleum (19%), and copper (8%). Major PRC exports to Latin America included electrical machinery and equipment (21%); machinery and mechanical appliances (15%); motor vehicles and parts (7%); and a wide array of industrial and consumer products."[xlii] 'The Chinese government issued its first policy paper on Latin America in 2008, to draw a comprehensive picture for future Sino- Latin America relationship. If that paper was a strategic vision, China's policy design towards Latin America nowadays is more concrete. President Xi Jinping announced the "1+3+6 Cooperation Framework", in his second year as President, during his second trip to the region. There is one plan –the China-CELAC Cooperation Plan (2015-2019)-, three engines and six sectors, according to Xi's idea. The three engines are trade, investment and financial cooperation. The framework includes six sectors, namely energy and resources; infrastructure; agriculture; manufacturing; S&T, and information technology, as priorities for economic engagements."[xliii]

The cooperation between China and the countries of the region are not limited to the economic sphere. China is investing heavily in the space programmes of the countries of the region. The fear is that China would use these investments for military purposes in the future. Apart from that is the military diplomacy. While China is not yet selling defence equipment in high value to the countries

the region, it is moving beyond small arms to higher value items such as naval vessels and radars. It has to be kept in mind that most countries of the region continue to be dependent on the United States for military assistance and aid. It would be also difficult for China to gain inroads into the military sector with the United States ensuing that the region remains a 'zone of American interest' but China's aspiration to become a global maritime power, with increasing responsibilities in contributing to peace and security in the face of traditional and non-traditional threats — such as piracy and terrorist acts — and safeguarding global public goods has meant that China will continue to increase its military engagement in the region. [xliv] "Chinese military interests in Latin America have only developed significantly in Argentina and Venezuela. At the space research station in Argentina's far-southern Neuquén department, China coordinated its Change 4 mission, in January, to the moon's hidden face. Fears remain that the station and its 35-meter wide antenna, which are outside Argentine government control, will engage in military espionage and that its real activities are not of a civilian nature. In Venezuela, China's military presence complements those of Russia and Cuba, which besides backing the government of President Nicolás Maduro, engage in joint military exercises to safeguard its border with Colombia."[xlv]

China is also using its diplomatic outreach to isolate Taiwan. It is trying to ensure that countries of the region downgrade their relations with the island nation. To ensure a sustainable China-Latin America relationship, China is also improving Chinese studies on Latin America, in order to serve the rapid development of the bilateral relationship. The rapid development of China-LAC relations is an important part of the changing international system. One that needs to be studied by India as it deepens its engagement in Latin America.

[V] India Engagements with Latin America

India has cordial and good relations with the nations of the region. Apart from the shared colonial past the countries of the region and India share a similar vision for the future. They have a youth bulge in their populations, they are striving to provide better social cover to their people, and fight corruption and the need for transparency have been a common factor. India and the countries of Latin America are also expanding their global footprint by taking prominent role in discussions on climate change, role of international financial institutions etc. And yet, India and Latin America have not yet shared much together. Neither can afford to remain ignorant of the other any longer. With the India deepening its engagements with Latin America and vice versa, the focus is on strengthening economic ties and diplomatic relations.

Nonetheless, India has to urgently address the issue of diplomatic representation on the continent by increasing the number of embassies. The region is now too important to not warrant such attention.

On the cultural aspects there is the need to encourage more Spanish and Portuguese language promotion and the need to translate each other literature for wider readership. India needs to explore ventures that would attract more investments from the region to India and vice versa. In this defence sector collaboration; space exploration and exploration in the development of sustainable blue economy could feature prominently. 'Latin America has a young, educated, skilled workforce and rich reserves of agriculture and natural resources. It is increasingly considered an investment destination due to its growing industrial and manufacturing strengthens and continuous improvements in the ease of doing business. India on the other hand offers immense opportunities for collaboration, trade and investment for partner countries from Latin America.'[xlvi] Trade for the moment is largely driven by energy exports but there is room for diversification. The region is home to three G20 economies, namely Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. In the past decade relations have developed to include investments in Informational Technology (IT) sector and Latin America emerging as an important market for the Indian pharmaceutical and automobile industries.

'Latin America can also contribute towards food security. The region is five times the size of India and has only half the population. India is currently importing pulses and oilseeds from many African and Southeast Asian countries at high costs. Latin America is also very rich in minerals such as copper, lithium, iron ore, gold and silver, and could give India an opportunity to increase investments for their extraction as well as for their import at cheaper rates.'[xlvii]

Relations have also witnessed an upswing with the growing number of high level visits from both sides. President Kovind and Vice President Naidu have visited the countries of the region. These visits underscore the legacy of India's association with the NAM and that it continues to influence New Delhi's engagement with Latin America. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Mexico in 2016 helped India upgrade its bilateral relations with Mexico while gaining the latter's support for India's entry into the nuclear export control regimes. BRICS has helped deepen India's relations with Brazil. However, President Bolsonaro has not been enthusiastic of multilateral organisations such as the BRICS. While he has participated in its summit meetings, India would need to look beyond the BRICS to engage with Brazil within the larger south-south cooperation policy. Perhaps the first step in strengthening the bilateral relations was taken when President Bolsonaro visited India as the Chief Guest of the 2020 republic day. During the visit, the two nations, "… adopted the Action Plan to Strengthen the Strategic Partnership between Brazil and India. The Action Plan is a comprehensive and forward looking document that outlines action in all spheres of cooperation, including (a) Political and Strategic Coordination; (b) Trade & Commerce, Investments, Agriculture, Civil Aviation and Energy; (c) Science, Technology and Innovation; Space Cooperation; Environment and Technical Cooperation; Health; (d) Defence and Security; (e) Culture and Education; and (f) Consu-

lar Issues, Social Security and Legal Cooperation."[xlviii] It needs to be pointed that the strategic relationship is a long term plan for close cooperation that India is looking to develop with Brazil beyond the current Presidency and into the future. Former President Macri also made a state visit to India on the invitation of Prime Minister Modi in February 2019. "The two leaders decided to elevate India-Argentina multi-faceted cooperation to a strategic partnership with focus on key areas for the prosperity of both countries….such as defence cooperation, space cooperation, development of renewable energy and collaboration on civil nuclear energy and increasing trade among other issues."[xlix] India is also exploring board economic cooperation with Chile, its sixth largest trading partner in the region while deliberation on a comprehensive free trade agreement with Peru is ongoing. Peru is also fast becoming a partner in the renewable energy sector and is part of the international solar alliance.

As nations look at a world post the pandemic and identify sectors that are going to help them jump start the economic process the best, India needs to identify sectors that have the potential to emerge as the new drivers of the economies of the region such as medical device manufacturing, automobiles, digital economic platforms, the aerospace industry. Not only do they provide opportunities for growth but also are likely to attract foreign direct investments. They can also contribute to India's Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat schemes. Looking ahead there is great potential for growth in the relations. India has to look beyond the large nations of the region namely, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico to also take note of the other smaller but political stable economically important nations of Chile, Peru, Paraguay etc. It is also right time that India develops a strategy to engage actively with the Caribbean and Central American nations beyond Panama. It has to look beyond traditional economic sectors to new and upcoming sectors such as renewable energy and financial technology or FinTech.

Latin America is not a monolithic one continent but a diverse continent with nations that are in different stages of development. To understand more of the region, India needs to encourage more emphasis on the study of the region. In the recent years, Latin America has become a priority area for India's foreign policy. Geography is no longer a hindrance between the two and in the coming years India is poised to increase its footprint in the countries of the region.

[IV] **Conclusion**

The elections are going to have an impact on the political and economic landscape of the region for the next few years. It has shown that democracy is gaining more support with the fear of military dictatorships declining. The will of the people and their support for leaders who will fight corruption and bring social & economic equality has been a prominent theme of the elections. It is not

likely that even if in the next elections an ideologically inclined party comes to power these issues will not remain. It will have an impact not only within the countries but also on the region and the regional integration processes.

The elections in Latin America have witnessed a common theme of anti-corruption, a demand for transparency, economic growth and end to violence. They prioritised domestic issues, with foreign policy being referred to in the context of its impact on the country. Apart from the lack of trust in the political parties, disillusionment with the political process, people are demanding change. They have elected leaders who have promised them development, economic growth and jobs and take a strong stand on improving law and order. They are looking at political manifestos that are talking about political stability.

The elections have been an important indicator of the strength of democracy in the region. Timely elections, voter participation has been relatively high and the transition of power has been peaceful showcasing a maturity in the democratic process. The elections, in some countries, saw a high number of first time candidates, ordinary people who decided to stand for elections. A considerable number of these candidates have been women, with the participation of indigenous people rising in Brazil and Mexico, especially. On the other hand, the elections have also shown the fragmentation within the major political parties such as within in Brazil and the polarisation among voters. Violence against the candidates leading to deaths, especially in Mexico, highlights the penetration of gang related violence into the political system of the region.

It would be wrong to say that the elections have led to a tide of conservative right wing parties in the region, away from the left wave that dominated in the beginning of this century. It is true that the right of centre has won the Presidency in some countries, most notably in Brazil. On the other hand Mexico is an example of leftist views coming to power in opposition to the centralist and right of centre ideology of the opposition parties. Nonetheless, one common factor of these elections is that people have voted for candidates who have projected themselves to be nationalists and have an image of strength. All the elected Presidents have stated that they would strengthen the image of the nation. The new governments have been elected with the mandate to address corruption within the government and the bureaucracy and ensuring economic development. There is a fear that such sentiments may be used by the newly elected heads of governments to side-line and persecute the members of the opposition which would be detrimental to democracy. This may allow them to build powerful presidency which may undermine the opposition and the larger legislative checks and balances system.

The elections have also showcased the power of the judiciary and the autonomy of the various election commissions, in some countries of the region, in their ability to conduct free and fair elections. It can be the stepping stone for the process of independence and accountability of other such institutions in the region. Violence unfortunately had played a role not just as a matter of policy concern but on the ground being faced by both candidates and the electorate. The major take away from the 2018-2019 electoral marathons is that it will likely be the key that will define the trends, direction, and intensity of political change in Latin America in coming years.

It has to be kept in mind that the marathon election cycle in the region has been fought on domestic. The focus of the new governments for the time being will be relations within the region. With political change within the region, governments will reach out to each other to consolidate their relations or build new partnerships. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico are major powers in the region. The three nations have new Presidents supportive of views that are different from their predecessors but facing similar challenges. This allows them to not only build new ties between them but also push for change within the region. Latin America has been one of the most integrated regions in the world. CELAC, UNASUR, the Pacific Alliance are organisation that have allowed the region to take an independent stand on regional and international issues. The integration process faces a danger with the indifference of some leaders and idealogical differences between others. The regional leaders have to come together to reverse the trend of letting extra regional powers gaining more political space in the region, which has been disastrous for the political and economic stability of the region in the past.

As noted relations with the United States, the most powerful nation in the Americas has been a dominant theme for most. This is understandable as most nations have deep economic and security ties with the United States. Asia in general has not been focussed on in these elections. Nonetheless, with the growing footprint of China in the region, relations with the Asian nation would be important. Countries of Latin America are looking towards China as a market for their produce and an investment partners in their domestic development projects.

The distance between the continent and India is no longer a factor hindering the relationship nor is language a barrier any more. Countries of the region are looking at India as alternative to their growing dependence on China. India is also attaching Latin American business with its growing economy. As India and Latin America work together to reform the established international order, it is an opportune moment for India to strengthen relations with at the countries of the region with which it shares no major differences.

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